

The Lion's Lady

by Lilibethe

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Summary: When Jaime Lannister leaves the Kingsguard and takes Bethany Westerling to wife, the course of history is changed forever.

Extremely AU. Rated M. (Jaime/OC)

1. Chapter 1

****Bethany****

>283 AC, the Crag

It was a somber morning. Bethany stared longing out at the Sunset Sea, her forehead pressed gently on the glass barrier between her bedchamber and the sweet freedom of the coastline. She wanted nothing more than to wade in the shallow water and feel the mist of the ocean on her skin, but she was long since forbidden by her lady mother. The salt of the waters made her curls rough and the time spent in the sun made her freckles more pronounced. They were common enough traits in girls that lived by the sea, but Bethany was a woman grown now, bled and ready to be bedded within a moon's time, when she would arrive in the capitol and be married.

She knew little of her intended, aside from his name and title. He was Jaime Lannister, heir to Casterly Rock. Her lady mother assured her of his charms and wit, and how gallant and handsome he was, but she wasn't sure any of that mattered in a marriage set forth for political gain. Bethany's duty was to further advance the Westerling name, and raise the station and fortunes of her family, and as sweet as the idea of love sounded, she wasn't convinced it was as important as being an obedient, humble wife that her husband could reward for her good nature. It was the lands and holdings their marriage could bring to her brother, Gawen, that propelled her alliance with the lions, not the silly dream of mutual affection betwixt she and her future lord. Still, the idea of love was a nice idea, regardless of its frivolous nature.

A knock sounded at the door, and she looked up, folding her hands in her lap and rising. "Come in," she beckoned, craning her neck slightly to see who it was.

"Ah, so you_ are_ awake," came a quick remark. "When the maids told me how early you'd begun to stir I'd thought them mad. My sweet sister has never risen before the dawn hours, I said, yet how remarkable to find you not only up, but dressed and packed as well!" Gawen entered the room and embraced his sister warmly, spinning her around twice before releasing her. "How beautiful you are, Bethy. Mother was right about the saltwater mucking your pretty curls. They're much finer now that you've abstained from the sea."

Bethany smiled at her brother and swatted playfully at his shoulder. "You mustn't let her hear you agree, Gawen, or else she'll proceed to bully me for her entire stay in the capitol. You don't wish such a fate on your sister, do you?"

"Certainly not," he replied, kissing her forehead. Stepping back, he surveyed her chambers, now a shell of their former glory. Her tomes and papers had been packed away, as well as her precious paints from Lys. All her gowns and slippers and jewels were brought to the courtyard hours ago, tucked safely on the back of the wheelhouse. "It is dreary in here," Gawen said, pursing his lips. "But not so dreary as I shall be to see you go, dear sister."

She took his hands in hers and squeezed them. "I should not think you dreary at all, brother, when you'll have the castle to yourself once Mother and I ride off. I shan't even imagine how many poor, innocent maidens you'll lure into your bedchamber."

Gawen matched her smirk. "What a vile thing to say, Bethy. Why, I am the most devout lord in the western realm, I assure you. Although, I must say, the maidens are neither _poor_ nor _innocent_ if they agree to come to bed with me."

"For shame, brother!" Bethany exclaimed, laughing. Then, as sudden as rain, she frowned and looked away, her eyes focused on the white seashells painted above her bedframe. She'd painted them with her father when she was only six years old. The memory made her eyes water. "I admit, Gawen, I shall hate to be away from home," she murmured softly, touching her long, white fingers to the bedpost. "For as much time as I spent by the sea, it is this castle that hold my heart."

Silence befell them, then after a moment Gawen sighed. "This is for the betterment of the family, Bethany. You mustn't let personal thoughts cloud your judgment. We are sending you on a mission, Mother and I, to see just how far you can make our family rise. It is not that we do not love you or want you, just the opposite in fact. We see a potential in you that _neither_ of us have the power to achieve. The Lannisters are the closest family to the King, even his Queen is a lioness. You must play the part of a good and gracious lady to Her Majesty, and you must be a kind, obedient wife to your husband. With any luck you'll birth a son and heir within the year and we'll all be praised for it."

"Of course, you're right," Bethany breathed, turning away. "I must do what I can for our family, as is my duty."

Gawen walked around to face her, lifting her chin by hooking his index finger under it and pulling it up gently with the pad of his thumb. "Sweet Bethy, you always do what is best for us," he said softly, kissing each of her cheeks. "I will leave you now to say goodbye to this room, and then I'll meet you in the courtyard to say our final farewells."

She bowed her head as he left, catching her reflection in the looking glass that was hung in the center of the western wall. Wide hazel eyes stared back at her, eclipsed by fair, unblemished skin. Her nose was straight, her lips were curved, her brows were groomed, and her heart-shaped face was lost in a sea of chestnut curls. For a brief moment she wondered if her face would please her husband, but banished the vain curiosity away immediately. It does not matter if he likes my face, she thought somberly, turning and leaving her childhood bedchamber for the last time. It never did.

* * *

><p>The courtyard was barren save for Gawen, their mother, and Bethany's former maid, who would be leaving to attend the Lady of House Marbrand once she'd gone. Beside the farewell party was her carriage, donned with banners that proudly displayed the sigil of House Westerling; six ivory shells on a field of golden sand. There were four chests stacked on the back of the wheelhouse, held in place by thick leather straps. Bethany regarded them for a moment, in awe that her entire life fit into four little trunks.<p>

"Are you ready to depart?" her mother asked, stepping forward. She would be accompanying Bethany to the capitol, to assure her safe arrival and attend the wedding. She wished Gawen could journey with her as well, but a lord seldom left his keep, even for a most beloved sister.

Taking one last look at the Crag, Bethany nodded. She would either leave now or not at all, so she chose to gather her skirts, kiss Gawen's bearded cheek, and step into the wheelhouse without a glance back at the home she'd grown up in. Her heart swelled with longing as her mother climbed in behind her and ordered the driver to ride on. Every instinct told her to stop the carriage and run for the water, but she sat firmly in place, focusing her gaze on the azure velvet of her skirts.

"Don't look so solemn, Bethany," her lady mother reprimanded. "You are going to wed into a great and wealthy family, and all you must do is provide a son and heir. Many young ladies would fight tooth and nail to attain your position, and I'm sure if your future husband sees you so dour he may deem to take one of those other young women instead."

Bethany turned her gaze to the woman that brought her into the world, then. Her mother was a fearsome woman to behold, with a long, dark braid that hung to her waist, laced with strands of sparkling silver. Her eyes were bright and brown, and her figure was dainty for the two children she'd birthed. She was donned in a heavy grey gown of damask with a hooded cloak of ivory draped behind her.

She might have been a beautiful lady in her prime, but for her pinched mouth, square jaw, and sharp tongue. She could crack words like a whip, and silence even the greatest men with a simple look.

Bethany wished to commandeer a room as her mother did, but her temperament fared closer to her late father, who was as docile as a doe.

"Smile," her mother commanded, holding her chin high. Without a second thought, Bethany obeyed. "There, you feather-headed, pretty thing. Ser Jaime will be enraptured at your beauty, to be sure. But don't let that fool you; sweet of face you may be, but place a single toe out of line and he'll crush you. You'd best keep your mouth shut and smiling, just like that."

"Yes mother," Bethany replied, looking away. From the window of the wheelhouse she could watch as the world passed by. It was a blur of greens and blues and greys, and she pressed her hand to the glass that stood between she and the whirlwind they rode by, transfixed on the fog that shrouded her touch.

The glass was smooth and cool, and she released a soft sigh, pulling her hand away. Her print remained, though she'd gone, and she allowed herself to glance back at the Crag through the back of the carriage. It was fading in the distance, but she could still see the crumbling stone. Perhaps she'd left her print there, as well. The thought gave her a small form of comfort, and she relaxed in her seat, settling back down.

"You know," said her mother, "I was given to a stranger when I was four-and-ten, hardly more than a girl. In truth, I was a lucky woman to have been handed to your father. Roland was a gentle soul..." For a moment her mother trailed off, and something in her expression changed. She seemed softer; it made her look almost young again, and every bit as beautiful as any young lady in love would be. Then she shook her head and tutted at herself for such folly. "A gentle soul, but a foolish one as well. No matter, I've done well enough raising you both without him."

"Yes mother," she said softly. She couldn't shake the worry that she herself might not be so lucky as her mother had been, however. What if her lord husband was not as kind and loving to her as her father had been to her mother? What if he was cruel? She pursed her lips and willed her thoughts to drift elsewhere. It would not matter if Ser Jaime had warts and a leer; their betrothal was contracted betwixt man and gods, and soon their marriage. Whatever qualms she had about his person were of no consequence. Their hands would be bound and their souls joined for all eternity, and she would simply have to endure.

2. Chapter 2

****Cersei****

>283 AC, King's Landing

She leaned over the cradle and brushed a few gentle fingers over her son's perfect, pink little cheek. He was squirming and fisting his chubby hands into the air, reaching for her. "Sweet boy," she cooed, pulling him carefully into her arms. He was still so young, so new, so impossibly beautiful. From the wisps of black atop his head to the wrinkly toes on his feet, she loved him. Her handsome son. Her prince. The future King of Westeros. The thought of this giggling babe sitting upon the Iron Throne almost made her laugh. Slowly, she

reached down and pressed her lips to his forehead, feeling the soft, supple skin there. He was so delicate, so fragile. Yet so perfect. Her little stag.

Once she would have been revolted by the idea of bearing her husband a child, for the way he'd treated her on their wedding night. How could she love a man who loved another, even in death? She'd even considered drinking moon tea when she discovered she carried a stag spawn, Jaime had even fetched a vial for her, but... she'd felt the child quicken within her, felt him move and kick and fight for his life. Who was she to take away this innocent babe's right to live?

Jaime hated her for it. He renounced his position in the Kingsguard and decided to take a wife, to have a child and show her just what she was doing to him. It was folly, of course, and she expected he would return to her side the following morning, but he hadn't. Nor did he come the next day, or the day following. Weeks had passed, then months, and just before Cersei's labor began she received news that Jaime was betrothed to a feather-brained Westerling girl. The thought of losing her other half, her soulmate, her lover, terrified her at the time. But then she birthed her son, her Steffon, and it was like all the troubles of losing Jaime melted away. Every time she looked at her boy, her perfect, precious little bundle of joy, all she could see was his future, what crown he might wear, what sort of a council he might keep, how studious he might be.

In her adoration for her son, she would notice parts of him that reminded her of Robert, too, like his dark hair or his strong grip, and it was like she was falling in love with her husband all over again. When he would hold their child she swelled with pride, not disgust. When he kissed her goodnight she found herself wanting more. She felt like a girl again, longing for her lord's touch. It was so new and exciting that she'd almost forgotten about Jaime, until she heard a knock on her chamber door and saw a head of golden hair that shined as brightly as her own.

"Brother," she greeted coolly, pulling Steffon closer to her chest.

Jaime strolled towards her balcony, peering out the dual glass panels. "My wife arrives today," he said, his voice distant. "The Westerling banners have been spotted on the Kingsroad, and no doubt they'll be here before evenfall."

Silence eclipsed them until, impatiently, Steffon slammed his fists into Cersei's hair and pulled, giggling when she wrinkled her nose in pain. "_No_", Steffon," she reprimanded softly, pulling her waves free from his strong little hands. "Princes must have patience, sweetling," she whispered, pressing her lips to his cheek.

"Motherhood becomes you," came Jaime's forlorn voice, and when she looked up he was watching her. "Though, I always thought that you would be holding a golden lion in your arms, not a stag."

Cersei turned away, hiding the pain that etched into her features. "You mustn't speak of such things, Jaime."

"Why not?" He neared, touching his fingers to her back ever so

gently. "We could have run to the Free Cities, you know. We could have lived in Lys and been man and wife openly, and had a thousand little babes. Yet you chose this... and him..."

"I will not apologize for my child," she said vehemently, walking from her brother's touch though she found herself in want for it. It had been so long since he'd last caressed her, so long since she'd felt his kisses trailing down her neck, her chest, her navel... She banished the thoughts, feeling herself weakening to him. "Nor will I apologize for loving my king. Why would I live as a whore in Lys when I am queen here?"

"Because then I could have you!" Jaime howled, slamming his fist into the nearby desk. "Because then we could be together! I've loved you. I've given my life to you, Cersei! I gave up everything for you, for us, yet you scorn me! You betray me for a squealing brat!"

"Do you think I do not love you, too?" Cersei rounded to him after putting Steffon in his cradle. He was crying, but she continued on her course to Jaime. "I have loved you since we were but children running in the gardens, I have loved you more than any woman has loved any man! Remember, brother, it was you that left me, the moment I discovered I was with child!"

"Left you? Cersei, I did everything you asked of me! I brought you the moon tea, I was ready to take the bloody thing and burn it for you, t'was you who chose to keep that bastard! T'was you that chose him over me!"

"He is my son!" Cersei roared, throwing a candle stick at her brother. "He is the future king of these lands, and if you think for one second that I would ever chose you over my child then you are mistaken, sire! If you so much as harm a hair on his head then I will have you thrown to the dogs!"

More silence ensued, and Cersei watched, suddenly regretting her words, as Jaime straightened himself out and stood tall. "Forgive me, Your Grace, for wasting your time," he said bitterly, turning on his heel to leave. "My bride will arrive soon, and you and His Grace are expected in the courtyard. Excuse me."

She didn't stop him as he left, but her eyes filled with hot, stinging tears. She wanted to call him back and rest her head on his lap as he toyed with her hair, she wanted him to tell her it was alright, that he loved her and only her, for all eternity, as he always had... but the sound of Steffon wailing was enough to remind her that Jaime was not what she needed, not anymore.

* * *

><p>News that the Westerling party had arrived came shortly after Cersei and Robert had finished supping in his solar. Steffon was asleep in the nursery and diligently tended to by his nursemaid, so the king and queen let him rest and went down to the courtyard together, Cersei's arm wrapped delicately around Robert's.<p>

In truth, though she'd all but shut him away from her, she hadn't a wish to see the woman that was to be her brother's wife. Robert, however, was glad to see the girl. Her father, Lord Roland Westerling, had been a friend of his during the Rebellion. After Lord

Roland's son, Elys, died in the Sack of King's Landing, he retreated to the Crag and passed away before he could return and meet Robert as King. Cersei cared little for the details, but accompanied her husband as decorum dictated, and offered her father and Jaime a tight-lipped smile as they entered the courtyard, where a wheelhouse drawn by four white drafts was pulling in through the Dragon Gate.

"Your Grace," Cersei's father greeted, bowing his head to his daughter and goodson.

"Father," Cersei replied. She didn't bother saying anything to Jaime. He wouldn't have replied.

A page boy came to the wheelhouse door, opening it and pushing down the steps. "The Lady Jyanna Westerling, and her daughter, the Lady Bethany Westerling," he announced, and just then a foot stepped out of the carriage. It was covered with a slipper of ebony and gold damask, and following was a gown of violet satin and the tail of a long, dark braid laced with grey strands. The woman was older, with a square jaw and a pinched little mouth.

"Lady Jyanna, welcome to King's Landing," Robert said warmly, pulling her in for an embrace. "I'm very sorry to hear about Roland. He was a good friend to the crown."

"Indeed," Lady Jyanna replied. Her words were sharp, and cut through the air like a knife. "He spoke very highly of you, Your Grace. I think he loved you very much."

Then came another swathing of cloth, carefully exiting the wheelhouse. This time it was a crimson confection, with golden seashells sewn at the breast and a slew of freshwater pearls laced about the base of the corset. Dagged sleeves so long they reached the ground drooped low as the lady clasped her hands at her waist. Cersei was loath to admit it, but Bethany Westerling was a pretty thing; thin and delicate with long chestnut curls and pale, unblemished skin. Her eyes were large and hazel, and her nose was straight. When she spoke, Cersei could see faint dimples in her cheeks. Pretty indeed, but a mere sapling compared to the sun.

"My lady," Robert greeted, offering his hand. The girl took it, dipping down to a low, graceful curtsy. "I knew your father well, and am pleased to see you. You are his very image."

"I am most honored to meet you, Your Graces," Lady Bethany replied, bowing her head carefully to them both. "And I thank you, most ardently. Indeed, my father was very fortunate to have such a good friend in Your Grace."

"T'was I that was the fortunate one," the king replied, offering a charming smile. Then he swung his head around and looked to where Jaime stood. "Well, Kingslayer, are you not going to greet your bride?"

Silence befell the courtyard, and Cersei watched as Lady Bethany slowly turned to catch her intended's eye. Jaime was looking her up and down, as if making a study of her, then he held out his hand. "My lady," he said smoothly, but with little emotion.

Bethany took his hand and fell into another sweeping curtsey. "My lord, I am so pleased to finally meet you. I've heard nothing but praise of you, and your good nature."

"Lady Bethany, we are glad that you have arrived in good health," Lord Tywin interjected, and she bowed her head graciously. "Now, come inside. I'm sure you are tired from your journey."

"Certainly, sire," Lady Bethany replied, falling into step beside Jaime as they all entered the Keep. Cersei remained behind, staring after them. The girl had taken Jaime's offered arm, her thin, white fingers brushing the sleeve of his doublet. The sight made her eyes sting once more. She knew what this would be, and she thought she was ready to release him... but seeing him on the arm of a feather-brained girl made Cersei's blood boil. _I cannot have them both_, she thought, her eyes trailing after Robert now. But how could she give either of them up?

As she entered the Keep she found herself at her husband's side, sliding her arm through his. He looked down at her and smiled, then he stopped, reached down, and pressed his lips to hers. His kiss was warm and welcoming and she poured herself into it. It said all that he couldn't say, that she couldn't say, and in that moment she was decided. It was Robert. It had to be Robert. Though she could still see Jaime from the corner of her eyes, it was Robert that stood before her, Robert that pulled her into him. He was her future. "Shall we go and see our little stag?" Robert asked, brushing his rough thumb pad across her lower lip.

Cersei smiled, letting herself rest against his chest. "Yes," she said softly, "I'd like that very much."

* * *

><p>Author's Note: In regards to it being unbelievable that Cersei and Jaime would ever stop being together, I beg you to remember that this is an alternative telling of A Song of Ice and Fire. I hope that in this chapter I've helped to explain what's happened between them, and why Jaime has decided to take a wife and leave the Kingsguard. I greatly appreciate the feedback, however! Thank you, and I hope you've enjoyed the story thus far! :)

3. Chapter 3

****Jaime****

>283 AC, King's Landing

He watched, indifferent, as his bride greeted the lords and ladies of court. It was her first time in the capitol, and all tried desperately to curry the favor of the future Lady of Casterly Rock. She spoke eloquently to each and every person, and waited patiently for them to say their piece before replying. His lord father was content with the girl he'd chosen for Jaime, which spoke volumes to her piety and good nature. It seemed she fit into the role of being his wife before they'd even said the words, and already she'd all but declared herself a Lannister from head to toe; from the words she spoke, to the crimson and gold gowns she wore.

To his surprise, Jaime found he was not displeased with her appearance. Bethany Westerling was a pretty young thing, to be sure. Her body was tight and lithe, her skin pale and unblemished, and she had long, softly curling chestnut ringlets that shone bronze in the sunlight. He was particularly drawn to her smile, dimpled and sweet as it was. He hardly received one himself, but he saw it sometimes, when she would notice a pretty flower in the gardens or spoke of her childhood home, the Crag. When she smiled, all the courtly decorum melted away and she was simply a girl, pretty and carefree and happy. Those moments intrigued him, but then she would go flat-faced, fold her hands delicately at her waist, and apologize for being silly, and he would go on annoyed with her prim and proper performance.

This day was no different. It was the last day they would share together before they were wed, and at his father's command he and his bride entered court at each other's sides, paying each other every attention and greeting those that would be their allies when they were ruling the Rock. It was drab to Jaime, but Bethany thrived around the random gentry of court. She was smiling to each lord and lady, and listened to their words with great care.

To Jaime, these people were no more important than a commoner, but to his young bride they were future friends, whose wives or daughters might one day stand as her ladies in waiting, whose sons and brothers might wed their daughters, or go to war with their boys. She played sweetly, but Jaime could see the cogs of calculation turning in her mind. He might not have cared much for the girl he would wed by the morrow, but he could appreciate qualities such as that in any person.

As his little bride was approached by Lord Mace Tyrell, Jaime noticed the royal page scurry into the throne room. "Announcing His Grace, King Robert Baratheon, first of his name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm," the man cried, "and Her Grace, Queen Cersei Lannister!" With a slam of his staff, the king and queen entered the room. Robert wore gold and black, with a sapphire pin in his doublet, and Cersei was donned in a satin assortment of emerald, with diamonds sewn at her breast in the shape of a doe.

The sight of her made Jaime weak; she looked effortlessly beautiful, with her long golden waves loose about her and a diadem wrought of gold and silver hanging low on her forehead. She was the sun, the Light of the West. He longed to reach out, take her hand, and pull her into him. He longed to show her just how deeply a lion could love. But a touch on his forearm stopped him in his tracks.

It was Bethany, who had made her way to his side. She was looking up at him with her large, round eyes, shining brightly in the light of the setting sun. "Forgive me for disturbing you," she said softly, "only, I feel faint. If you would excuse me, I'd like to rest for a while."

Her voice was so delicate, so innocent, and when she spoke he could see her dimples. She truly was a pretty thing. "Certainly, my lady," he allowed. She smiled at him before turning to leave, her gown of cloth-of-gold glimmering in the sunlight as she went.

"She's a fine young lady," Lord Mace remarked, nearing Jaime. "A pretty face and a firm body. What more could a man want in a

wife?"

"Careful, ser, you are speaking of my brother's bride to be," came a smooth, silken voice. They both turned to see Cersei, smiling at Lord Mace like he had amused her. "I'm sure he would not thank you for making jests at her expense."

"Nor she, I suspect. Forgive me, Your Grace," Lord Mace replied, grinning and excusing himself. When they were alone, Jaime desired nothing more than to pull her into the alcove in the wall and ravage her until the entire court could hear her roaring with pleasure. But it had been nearly two weeks and she hadn't so much as looked in his direction. She'd made her choice, and they would both have to live with it.

Jaime felt the familiar prickle of jealousy trail up his spine as Robert neared and pulled Cersei in for a hot, wet kiss. "Excuse me, Majesties," he ground out. "My bride has gone to rest, and I believe I'll go and join her."

"Jaime, wait!" Cersei insisted, but looked down at her thumbs when he turned to face her. "I... I hope you rest well tonight, brother," she said simply, lacing her fingers through Robert's.

He'd never felt such pain than he did when he witnessed Cersei publicly declare herself as his. To watch the woman he loved kiss and hold and whisper sweet nothings to another man made his blood boil, and he clenched his fists tight, bowed, and left without so much as another word. There was nothing to say. She'd made her peace with her decision, and he would have to as well. It was no matter, though. If Cersei could find diversion in Robert, then he would seek it in the sweet, young girl that was to be his by the law of man and gods come morning, and his sister would be made to watch just as Jaime had been for so long. He would shove his wife in her presence as oft as he could, and he was certain within no time she would come to realize what a grave mistake she'd made in letting him go.

* * *

><p>He'd found Lady Jyanna sitting primly on an ornate sofa, working diligently on embroidering a cushion. She told him that Bethany was in the study with her handmaiden, and he thanked her, taking it upon himself to go to the room and peer through the door. She was sitting by a hearthfire, but all he could see were her bright hazel eyes and the top of her chestnut curls. The rest of her was covered by a large white canvas resting on an oak easel. She was focused, and didn't notice him enter as her handmaiden had. He snapped towards the door and the young brown-haired girl left, and only when the door shut behind her did Bethany look up from what she was doing.<p>

Immediately a warm, pink flush washed over her. "My lord," she breathed, rising. There was paint on her cheeks in various blues and greens, and she was holding a freshly wetted brush. She'd changed her gown, as well, to a thin shift of pale green with a golden robe of satin silk laced over it. "Forgive my state of undress and this... this mess. If I had known you were coming..."

"It is no worry, my lady," he replied. In truth, seeing her slightly disheveled and at ease only made his lust for her stronger. He strode

closer, putting a hand to her cheek. She looked nothing like Cersei, nothing like his past, and by the morrow she would be his and his alone, he wouldn't ever have to share her company, her whispers, her _body_. Just the thought of it sent shivers down the nape of his neck, and he pulled her in and pressed his lips to hers before she could raise a word in protest.

She tasted of honey and lemon, and her skin was as supple and soft as running water. He poured his hatred and lust and need into the kiss, and groaned when she wouldn't open her mouth for him, because he wanted _more_. But when he pulled away and saw the shock and confusion on her face, he only wanted to scream. He ought to have apologized, but instead he merely turned to leave.

"Wait," came Bethany's soft voice. When he looked over his shoulder at her, he could see that she was already making her way to him. "My lord, wait. You... you have paint there, on your cheek. Here," she licked the pad of her thumb ever so slowly and rubbed the wetness across his cheekbone with care. "There," she breathed, looking up at him through her lashes.

He'd never felt such gentleness towards him. It bewildered him to think that any one soul could be so tender. "Thank you," he murmured, staring down at her. The streaks of paint on her cheeks were rubbed to splotches now, and her hair where he'd fisted into it was tangled. She was still recovering her breath from their kiss, and the way she looked up at him, with such wide, welcoming eyes, only added to the charm of her shortness of breath.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you," she said quickly, stepping away and looking down. "I did not mean to upset you in any way, sire."

"No," he said at once. "No, it is not you. It's... I've much on my mind."

"Of course," she agreed, pursing her lips. After a moment of silence, she fell into a curtsy, then straightened her posture and returned to her seat, dipping her brush back into the paints. As if as an afterthought, she looked back up at him and spoke again. "Would... Would you perhaps like to have a seat with me, my lord? The fire is warm, and I believe my mother has called for a musician to play tonight."

He thought on it for a moment, and found himself taking a seat before he could reply. There was something pure in her request, something innocent, and he obeyed as a dog might obey its master. "What are you painting?" he asked, leaning over. From what he could see, the canvas was mostly white, save for a small bit in the center where she'd fleshed out the beginnings of waves.

"It's the Sunset Sea," she replied, getting lost in the strokes of her brush. "I find I miss it terribly. I used to wade by the beach for hours and hours..." Her courtly smile was replaced with a look of pained longing, and in that moment Jaime felt ashamed. Bethany had been uprooted from her home to come and be a stranger's bride, and he'd done little but use her to spite his sister. It was cruel, even he could not deny that. "Forgive me, I shouldn't have spoken as such," she said quickly, mending her words. "I'm very grateful to be marrying you, truly. I do not mean to seem discontented."

"I wouldn't have assumed so," Jaime replied. "You are able to speak freely here, you know. It cannot be easy, leaving your home."

Bethany regarded him then frowned. "No, I don't believe it is." After a few more strokes of her paintbrush, she turned to him. "Were you upset when you left Casterly Rock to join the Kingsguard?"

"No." The answer was honest enough. He'd missed some aspects of the Rock, to be sure, but Cersei was always more important than the west had ever been. He would have waged a thousand wars if it meant having her; but was use was fighting for her if she no longer wanted him?

He watched as Bethany swallowed and looked back to her canvas, nodding. "You are very brave, then, my lord. For it is the hardest business I've ever had to endure."

Jaime fell lax against the cushions he reclined on and raked his hand through his tousled waves. _ Indeed, _ he thought, _ this is a hard business for the both of us _.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: I've noticed that all of my feedback so far is negative... and I'd just like to address it and say that while I really appreciate everyone's point of view, I would be grateful if the reviewers would write critique along with their comments, so I can better improve my writing. Also, I understand that this story isn't canonical with the characterization and events of A Song of Ice and Fire, but that's exactly what makes this an AU. It diverges from canon. That's the point here. Anyways, I am hopeful that at least a few out there are enjoying, but if not that's okay. I'll keep writing this, even if it's just for myself. Thank you all, and I hope you've enjoyed the story thus far! :)

4. Chapter 4

****Bethany****

>283 AC, King's Landing

She hadn't slept. The twinkle of morning light danced through her bedchamber window, painting her chamber a glorious gold, but all Bethany could see was Jaime Lannister's face as he leaned in and kissed her. He had a slight stubble, and his scruff made her cheeks red and raw when they were done, and he'd tasted of mulled wine. She'd never been kissed before, and she hadn't known what to do, but when it was over with she couldn't help but feel as though that kiss was not meant for her in the first place.

He'd stayed for a short while afterwards, but ultimately left without so much as saying goodbye. Bethany would have paid a thousand gold dragons to know what was going on in the inner workings of his mind that night, but she quickly shut all such thoughts away. It would do little good to dwell on them, and she would have to rise soon to ready herself. It was their wedding day, and she had to look every bit the blushing bride.

A knock sounded at her door and she waited a moment, stretching

languidly on her featherbed, before bidding them enter. "The hour grows late, child, yet you still remain in bed? I tell you, your lord husband will not appreciate a lazy wife." Her mother entered the chamber with a tight-lipped frown, her arms folded and her brows furrowed in frustration. "Get up, the maids have drawn you a bath."

"Yes mother," she murmured, rolling out of bed. The floor was cold, and she shivered as she padded out of her chamber towards the bathing room, where a giant copper tub had been placed and filled with steaming water. Two young maids entered, as well as her new handmaiden, the young Lady Elaena Plumm, sent to her by Lord Tywin. She was a western girl, with dark hair and soft blue eyes, who was to tend to her during her stay at court, and accompany her when she and Jaime would eventually ride for the Rock.

"Bring the smelling oils," Bethany's mother commanded one of the maids. "And you," she said, turning to Elaena, "fetch my daughter's gown and jewels. And a comb, for her hair."

"Yes, madam," the maid and Lady Elaena replied in tandem, curtsying before making to leave.

"You," her mother said to the last maid, "go find the scrubbing sand, the white brought from Essos." The girl nodded and scurried away, and by the time she and her mother were alone, Bethany had undressed and stepped into the tub. The water was scalding hot and turned her skin pink, but she didn't mind. She liked the heat, it made her feel clean. As she relaxed in the warmth of the water, she felt cold hands press at the base of her neck. "Your curls are so fine now that you're away from the sea," her mother murmured, running her fingers through the knotted ends of her unbrushed ringlets.

Bethany leaned into the touch, though it would be a falsity to say she was not surprised by the sudden gentleness her mother exuded. "I still remember my wedding day. We were married in a sept by the coast, and your father wore a fine doublet of gold. I was in white, and he told me I looked like a seapearl... we were so young, Bethany, like you and your lord are. Young and foolish... but remember to at least be eager to learn. In life, in love... It is imperative that you make this marriage useful for both House Lannister and House Westerling."

Her mother's words drifted off as Elaena and the other maids entered the bathing chamber. Scented oils from the Reach were poured into her tub, and the sweet aroma of roses drifted into the air. She sighed, sinking lower into the deliciously hot water. Then Elaena took the white sand from Essos and rubbed it between her dampened hands before beginning to scrub at Bethany's skin. It felt gritty, and even painful in some areas, but when it was done she felt fresh and clean and renewed. Like she had been scrubbed out of her old shell and into the skin of a lioness.

She rose from the tub and was patted dry, changed into a thin shift, and sat in front of the vanity. The maids rubbed soothing oils into her skin to soften it, and her mother pulled a small trunk from a drawer in the front room wardrobe. "What is that, mother?" Bethany asked, watching curiously as her lady mother reentered her chamber.

"It's the veil I wore on my wedding day," her mother replied, in a voice softer than she'd ever known. "My mother made it for me. It took her three moons." The maids, now brushing through her curls, all fawned over the darling veil. It was a gorgeous confection, sewn delicately with Myrish lace and pale, pale silk. "Your father and I wished for you to wear it," Lady Jyanna murmured. "He would have been proud indeed to see how beautiful you have become."

Teary-eyed and smiling, Bethany embraced her mother, sighing into her braid. "Thank you."

For a mere moment, just as she was pulling away, she could have sworn she saw her mother smile back at her, but the smile faded as quickly as it came, and Bethany watched her move to the featherbed, where Elaena had laid out her wedding gown. Rising, she tentatively took in the beautiful thing. It was the first time she'd ever seen it, and she felt her heart being to thud rapidly in her chest. It looked far more expensive than her mother or brother could ever afford. "Mother, this is too much," she breathed incredulously.

Her mother frowned, eyeing it. "Girl, come here," she ordered Elaena. When her handmaiden had come, her mother spoke again. "This is not my daughter's gown. Where did you find this?"

Bethany's eyes went wide and she turned to her handmaiden, dumbfounded. "That is Lady Bethany's gown, my lady. The seamstress gave it to me herself," Lady Elaena replied, panicked. "She said it was a gift."

Her mother folded her arms. "A gift? From whom?"

"From me." All turned to see the queen enter the Westerling chambers. She was donned in a delicate gown of black and green, with a vibrant sash of gold wrapped about her thin waist. Her long golden waves were braided and twisted up high on her head, with her dainty crown nestled carefully within them. "Forgive me, my lady, but I was hoping to surprise my goodsister with a present. I noticed her gown was being altered, and I decided to... have some changes made. I hope they are in your taste."

Bethany fell into a deep curtsy. "Your Grace, I am eternally grateful," she said, breathless. "I am so honored to have been given such a beautiful gift."

"It is nothing, only a small token of kinship," the queen replied, waving her hand submissively. "I hope that it is the beginning of a friendship between you and I, Lady Bethany. I only hope to please the woman that is to be my brother's wife."

"Certainly, Your Majesty," Bethany agreed, "I am more than happy to be your grateful servant, and most loyal friend."

Cersei smiled, but there was a hint of displeasure in her eyes, and Bethany pursed her lips, hoping she'd not upset her. "Rise, sweet Bethany," the queen bid, "I'd like to see you in your gown."

The maids worked with deft fingers to untie Bethany from her robe and don her in the gown that Cersei had commissioned for her. It was a beautiful dress; the fabric was rich ivory samite, with cloth-of-gold Myrish lace sewn to the bust and across the long, dagged sleeves. The

waist was cinched with a belt of diamonds and opals, and the neckline was decorated with golden lions, roaring on their hind legs. When she was laced into the gown, she felt twice as heavy and twice as clumsy.

"But you are a beauty," the queen breathed softly, staring at her. "So fair, and with hair like spun silk... Jaime is a blessed soul to receive such a pretty wife."

Bethany flushed. "It is I who is blessed to wed him, truly."

Cersei smiled another sad, pained smile, and then looked away. "Well, now that I've seen the blushing bride I will go and find the king. I will see you at the ceremony." She bowed her head to Bethany's mother, then to Bethany, and then she took her leave. Lady Jyanna came to Bethany's side and took her shoulders, steering her towards the looking glass so she could pin the veil in her hair and clasp the cloak of House Westerling to her shoulders.

"That was very kind of the queen," Bethany whispered from under the ivory lace of her veil.

"Perhaps, but it was calculated all the same, child," her mother replied. "Remember, nothing kind is ever given without a price. Now come along, the ride to the sept is long and we're already late."

* * *

><p>She'd arrived at the Sept of Baelor atop the back of a glorious blood bay that had been decorated in the crimsons and golds of House Lannister, and she'd given alms to the smallfolk that had gathered to greet her small procession. Her goodfather was there to greet her at the steps, and he sent a stable hand to help her from her saddle. "My lady," Lord Tywin acknowledged her, dipping his head.<p>

"My lord," she replied, taking his arm as he offered it to her. He would play the role of her father for the ceremony, and walk her down the isle to where Jaime and the High Septon would be. They walked side by side to the doors, and waited for the servants to open them. "Thank you," she whispered to one of the boys, who flushed at her words and scurried away when Lord Tywin glanced his way.

As soon as the doors were opened, Bethany felt fear begin to creep into her heart. Each and every guest turned to see she and Lord Tywin enter the sept, and she swallowed hard, pursing her lips and thanking the gods that her face was hidden by her veil. Her mother would have reprimanded her for her nervous folly. She'd known what to expect when she arrived in the sept, but to be in the moment, to feel the hundreds of eyes on her, focusing on her, terrified her more than she had ever anticipated.

And then she saw Jaime. He was wearing all gold, from his doublet to his painted leather boots. Even his cloak, which pooled like molten gold around his feet, shimmered like sunlight. Her hand shook as she reached out to take his open palm, stepping away from Lord Tywin. Jaime pulled her to his side, but didn't say anything as they turned to face the High Septon.

"Welcome, friends, family, and loved ones," the High Septon said, his voice ringing softly throughout the sept. "We are here today to join

these two souls, and bind them as one from now until the end of their days. Should anyone object to their beautiful union, please say your peace now."

Silence ensued, and after a time the High Septon smiled, bowed his head, and clasped his hands together. "You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection."

A page boy scurried towards the dais and knelt down, offering Jaime a lush velvet cloak of crimson with a roaring lion sewn across the back. She turned her back to him so he could unclasp her glimmering cloak of House Westerling, and replace it with the heavy velvet cloak of House Lannister. The weight of it nearly brought her crashing to the ground, but she turned and took Jaime's hands when instructed, using his body to hold herself upright.

"In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one, for eternity," the High Septon called out, wrapping a soft, silken ribbon over their joined hands. "Look upon one another and say the words."

Bethany swallowed hard and, in unison with Jaime, spoke the words. "Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, I am his."

"I am hers."

"And he is mine, from this day until the end of my days."

"And she is mine, from this day until the end of my days."

Her heart soared into her throat as Jaime lifted her veil and leaned in to press his lips to hers. He was freshly shaven and she sighed, feeling his soft, supple skin touch her own. The kiss only lasted a heartbeat, and then it was over and she was being led by her new husband out of the sept and towards the carriage that would take them back to the great hall.

She was helped into the wheelhouse first, and watched as Jaime entered after her. The door was shut and suddenly they were alone. She stared at him, eyeing every feature on his face. The face she would be wedded to form this day until the end of her days. And he was looking at her, too. They were each other's future. Each other's whole life.

"We are certainly married now," Jaime said, and she couldn't discern if he was frowning or smirking.

Either way, Bethany took his hand and offered a shaky smile. "Indeed we are."

* * *

><p>The feast was magnificent. They'd served thirty courses, though Bethany hadn't been able to touch a bite. The gown she wore weighed her down and made her too uncomfortable to eat. Her husband, however, had enjoyed each morsel and at least five cups of a spiced Dornish red. He hadn't paid much attention to her since they'd left the wheelhouse, and she was beginning to wonder if their whole marriage would be so cold.<p>

"My lady." She looked up and noticed the king standing before her. He offered a hand and smirked. "May I have this dance?"

Her eyes flickered to Jaime. He was all but asleep in his chair, so she turned her head back to the king and smiled, though she knew she would regret trying to be graceful and charming while she danced in a dress that weighed more than she did. "Yes, Your Grace, you may," she replied, taking his hand.

The king grinned and led her from the dais. When the court noticed, the music stopped. "No, no," the king howled at the band, "_play_! We cannot dance with no music!"

Bethany kept her smile bright, fearing what might happen if she displeased the king. He took her hands in his and, as soon as a new song began to play, they started to dance. King Robert was clumsy with his footing, and even more so because of the sheer volume of her skirts, but Bethany twirled under his arm with ease, and found that dancing in her gown was not as limiting as she'd thought it might be.

More couples joined them in the dance, and Bethany laughed openly as the king lifted her into the air and spun with her in his grasp. When he released her she moved to turn under his arm once more, but was caught by the wrist and wrenched away from him and into the arms of another.

"Must you take all my wife's attentions, Your Grace? I've only just wedded her, you see. Certainly it should be my honor to dance with her," Jaime said, smirking. He looked drunken and tired but the grin on his face was wolfish.

"Forgive my husband, Majesty," Bethany amended quickly, falling into a curtsy. "I think the wine has gotten to his head. I'll take him to rest, if you'll excuse me."

The king didn't reply, however, and had his narrowed eyes set firmly on Jaime. "I've no need to rest," her husband replied with a flick of his wrist. "Just a desire to have my wife in my arms."

"Please, sire," she whispered to him, looking around. The music had faded out once more, and there were whispers surrounding them. "You mustn't say such things..."

"And why not?" Jaime pulled her behind him and looked down at her thumbs to avoid the hot eyes that were following their every move. She felt flushed and embarrassed, and only wanted to run away. "You are my wife, after all."

"Indeed, she is." Lord Tywin stepped forward, hands folded behind his back. "And I'm sure your wife would be more than happy to retire to bed. Goodnight."

Bethany shot a thankful glance to her goodfather, though she knew in her heart that his intervention wasn't truly meant for her, but for House Lannister. Still, she took Jaime's sleeve and tugged on it, steering him away from the bristled King Robert and towards the halls. "I did not need you to save me," he griped at her once they were alone, ripping his doublet from her grasp and turning away from

her. "_Stupid_, childish girl."

"You were offending His Grace," Bethany replied, shaking her head. "It is treason to talk as such to the king."

"Treason? No. Crude, perhaps, but a punishable crime? Certainly not."

"Is there much difference, when it is the _king_ who decides how thin the line between the two is drawn?" Bethany pulled him into an alcove in the wall and straightened out his shirt and cloak, then ran her fingers through his hair to neaten it. "You should not be so flippant, Jaime."

Her husband stared at her for a moment, and when he spoke it sent shivers down her spine. "He's taken _more_ than enough from me, and if he seeks to have you too, what is _mine_ by right and by the laws of men and gods alike, then I will teach him otherwise. You are mine. _Only_ mine." His fist had reached her throat, and he cupped the skin there, not violently, but possessively.

"Only yours," she repeated. "But only if you live long enough to see it so."

An irritated smirk grew on his lips, and he released her, heaving a sigh. "Come," he said. "Let us to bed, then."

She laced her arm around his and followed obediently as he led her through the Red Keep. They were halls she'd never wandered, and she wondered how she would ever be able to remember them all. After a while they stopped short at a door with two juxtaposed lions painted on the dark-stained wood. He opened the door for her, and she entered, looking around curiously.

The room was tidy, aside from the boxes of her things, which had been piled in a corner. She touched her fingertips to the cool stone wall to support herself, feeling the weight of her gown and the cloak dragging her down. "Allow me," came a silken voice behind her, and Bethany sighed in open relief as the cloak was unclasped from her shoulders and dropped unceremoniously to the floor. His fingers returned once the deed was done, and she bit her lip as Jaime began to trace his fingers over the laces of her gown.

"Shall we have some wine, first?" she offered nervously, turning to face him. He looked handsome but frightening in the dim moonlight. The gold of his hair washed to a pale milky tone, and his eyes shone bright like wildfire.

"No," he replied cattily, "I'd rather have you."

Even in the shadowy darkness of his chamber, Bethany was certain he could see her blanch. Fear crept into her, and she felt blood rushing to her ears. "Very well," she said quietly, turning away to undo her laces. Her fingers were clumsy and numb, and after a few minutes he came to her aid. He had them undone and the gown removed in mere seconds.

Shivering in just a thin shift, Bethany realized just how heavy the gown had been. When he put a hand to her waist to guide her to their marriage bed, she winced. She would be bruised and bloody, to be

sure, but as soon as she was laid on the bed, all the pain of her hips dissipated, in preparation for the pain she would soon feel between her legs.

She could smell wine on his breath as he climbed above her, and wrinkled her nose when he laughed in her face after slipping on the satin sheets. "It will only hurt a little," he said after toeing off his bottoms. "And only for a moment. I promise you."

Bethany clenched the bedsheets and her jaw, willing herself not to cry as he plunged himself into her. His movements were hard and fast and she wanted to sob. She'd never expected gentleness, but this... it was embarrassing, and painful, and degrading. She wanted to curl up under the furs and be done with it.

And then Jaime cried out in pleasure and stilled within her, just as it became too painful to bear, and fell beside her. Within minutes he was snoring, and she was left to wipe her unshed tears alone. From the great hall to the bedchamber, it had been nothing but hostility, frustration, and impatience. As Bethany pulled the furs over herself, she began to wonder if this was what the rest of her life would be like...

I must only give him a son, she thought desperately. _Once I birth an heir I can go home... To the Crag, to the sea_. So she began to dream of a time when she would retreat to Gawen and the soft sands on the coast, and prayed silently to the gods that she would quicken with child.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Thanks, everyone, for the kind words! They were refreshing to hear after all of the negative feedback I've been receiving. In regards to any time jumps, yes, I will be pushing the story forward a few times by large gaps, which is why I've added dates underneath the POV. It may not happen for a while yet, but I decided to add them anyways, to help keep the storyline in check regardless. And yes, you will be seeing Tyrion! Probably not in the immediate future, but soon! ****As a side note****: I can appreciate that you want to voice to me how you feel about my story, whether you hate or love it. However, I do ask that you are not rude to other reviewers, simply because they do not share your opinion on this fic. If I see any more mean comments directed to/about other reviews, they will be deleted without a second thought. I can handle the hate, but I will not put up with it being unleashed on others. Thank you. Anyways! I hope you've enjoyed the story thus far! :)

End
file.